VISITING RURAL SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL – WHY IT HURTS SO MUCH

In conversation with Kgabo Masehela

Together with four test administrators, I spent a week testing Grade 3 learners at 17 schools in the Nkandla district in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). This formed part of the Assessment Modelling Initiative project, funded by the Research Triangle Institute in the United States. The paper-and-pencil test aims to evaluate learners' performances at the end of the Foundation Phase (Grade 3) and to provide support to educators. Since 2000, the number of schools participating in the project has grown to 480 in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Northern Cape and the Eastern Cape. In 2003, we tested 17% (30) of the 126 sampled schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Nkandla district in KwaZulu-Natal is well known for a number of reasons: it is the birthplace of South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma, and it is the home of the popular maskandi music and the evergreen Ekhombe forest that houses unique species and promotes eco-tourism.

But for me, Nkandla will forever be associated with the abject poverty, and the desperation on the faces of the children. Despite government policies, resources, and structures to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of education, it appears that nothing has filtered down to the poorest of the poor.

We arrive at the first primary school at 7:30 am. The school is deserted, although we did pass several learners some kilometres back. A teacher emerges from a cottage on the school grounds. We explain the purpose of our visit and ask to see the school principal. "She is not coming today because she is not feeling well," the teacher says.

The children start arriving in dribs and drabs. The bell rings at 8:30 am. Children are shivering from the cold. All the windowpanes are shattered in the Grade 3 class. Old pieces of chalkboard cover the back windows. The pot-holed floors have not seen polish in years. Because there is no fence, goats roam around the school. The test administrator goes through the instructions in the manual and the tests get underway.

The principal arrives at 10:00 am. "Why do you attack us?" she immediately wants to know. I explain that our co-ordinator was at the school a few weeks ago as part of informing every sampled school of our visit. I reach for a file, containing a form that indicates receipt of the letters with the school's stamp on it.

I ask the Grade 3 teacher about the living conditions of the pupils. The level of poverty is "terrible", she says. "Many parents are unemployed and there is no work here. Many people just stay at home and grow dagga in the mountains and then the police arrest them. They just sit at home and drink traditional beer."

I later ask about HIV/AIDS-related deaths. "No," she says. "People living here don't die of this illness. Those who have AIDS get it in Gauteng and Durban. When they come back, they come just to die."

One child wears a threadbare red jersey and worn-out black open stilettos. Her name is Nonkululeko, meaning "freedom". "Where is your mother?" I ask. She smiles looking doubtful. The teacher quickly interrupts in English. "Her mother died three weeks ago and she is not even aware of it." One child in the group looks angry. I ask him, "What would you like to be when you grow up?" "ALIVE!" he responds.

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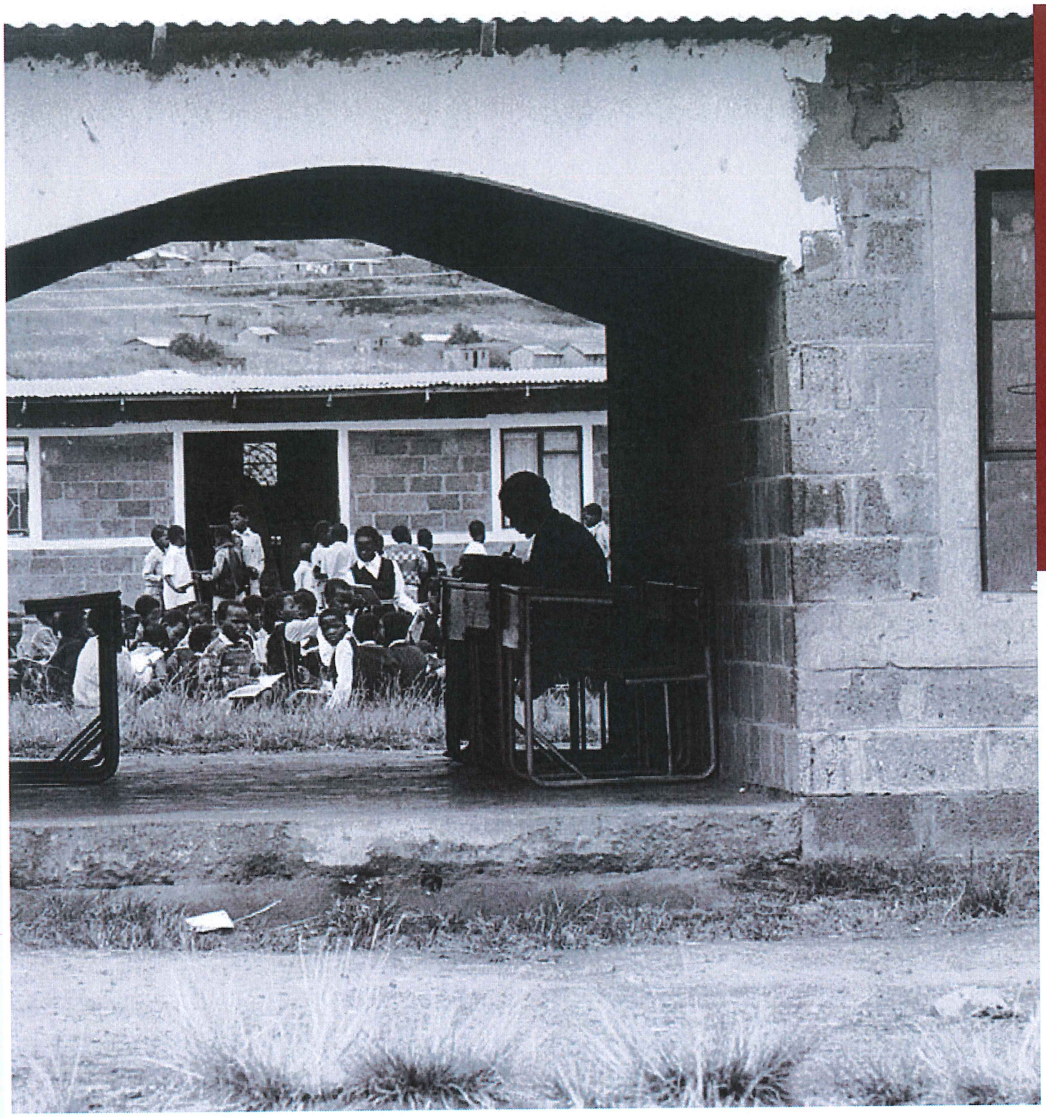

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Against this background, I can hardly look at the children taking the tests. The test results are poor. There is a tremendous gulf between the required skills and their capabilities. In many cases, learners could not distinguish between an addition sign and a multiplication sign and struggled with the addition of numbers larger than 100 – implying that they do not understand basic arithmetic.

The implications of this gulf are frightening. In one set of tasks, which learners should be able to answer in Grade 3, these were some of the responses: 3 x 9 = 7

92 + 8 = 41

2 x 8 =10

500 – 300 = 400

In nearly every school we found a similar response from several learners. At eight of the seventeen schools the principal, the class teacher, or both, were absent. On average, three teachers in each of these schools, including the principal, were late. Of the seventeen schools we tested, only six had active feeding schemes, and only two of the five circuits had feeding schemes. Absenteeism and dropout rates were high.

Some teachers are eager to improve conditions at the schools. They ask me for advice. I tell them the priority is to apply for social grants, to start feeding schemes, to do what they can do to plan better and to provide the Department of Education with more accurate projected enrolment figures for the following year in advance. They should order enough education materials, furniture, classrooms and ablution facilities. And stop corporal punishment, I plead, remembering how I heard a male teacher (who arrived late) beating children in the classroom next door.

Where will these children end up? I think in desperation. Like Jonathan Kozol (1991) in *Savage Inequalities*, I conclude that in nine years from now, half the class will have dropped out. Eighteen years from now, when they are supposed to be graduating, some will be in prison. It dawns on me that if these children are not provided with proper education to lead healthy and productive lives, the society will suffer. We will pay a price in incidents of violence, hijackings, and rapes.

I ponder the words of Ali Mazrui (1980) on the ultimate carriers of the modern world's "new revolution". In Nkandla, may the carriers of the "new revolution" be the children who will no longer tolerate the status quo?

I agonise over why a society, as rich and frequently as generous as ours, would leave these children in such destitution. Children in the rural areas deserve the same quality of education as those in the affluent KwaZulu-Natal suburbs. If the children of our politicians were enrolled at these schools things will certainly change.

The former Education Minister, Professor Kader Asmal, at some stage wanted schools to display national symbols, such as the South African flag, to symbolise equality, prosperity and justice. Children from Nkandla will probably not share the entitlements symbolised by that flag. If no drastic measures are taken, they will continue to experience pangs of hunger, inadequate schooling, and crippling disease. They will be broken in mind and spirit, unless we, as a caring nation, do something about it. •

Mr Kgabo Masehela is a Research Manager in the Assessment, Technology and Evaluation Education Research Programme.

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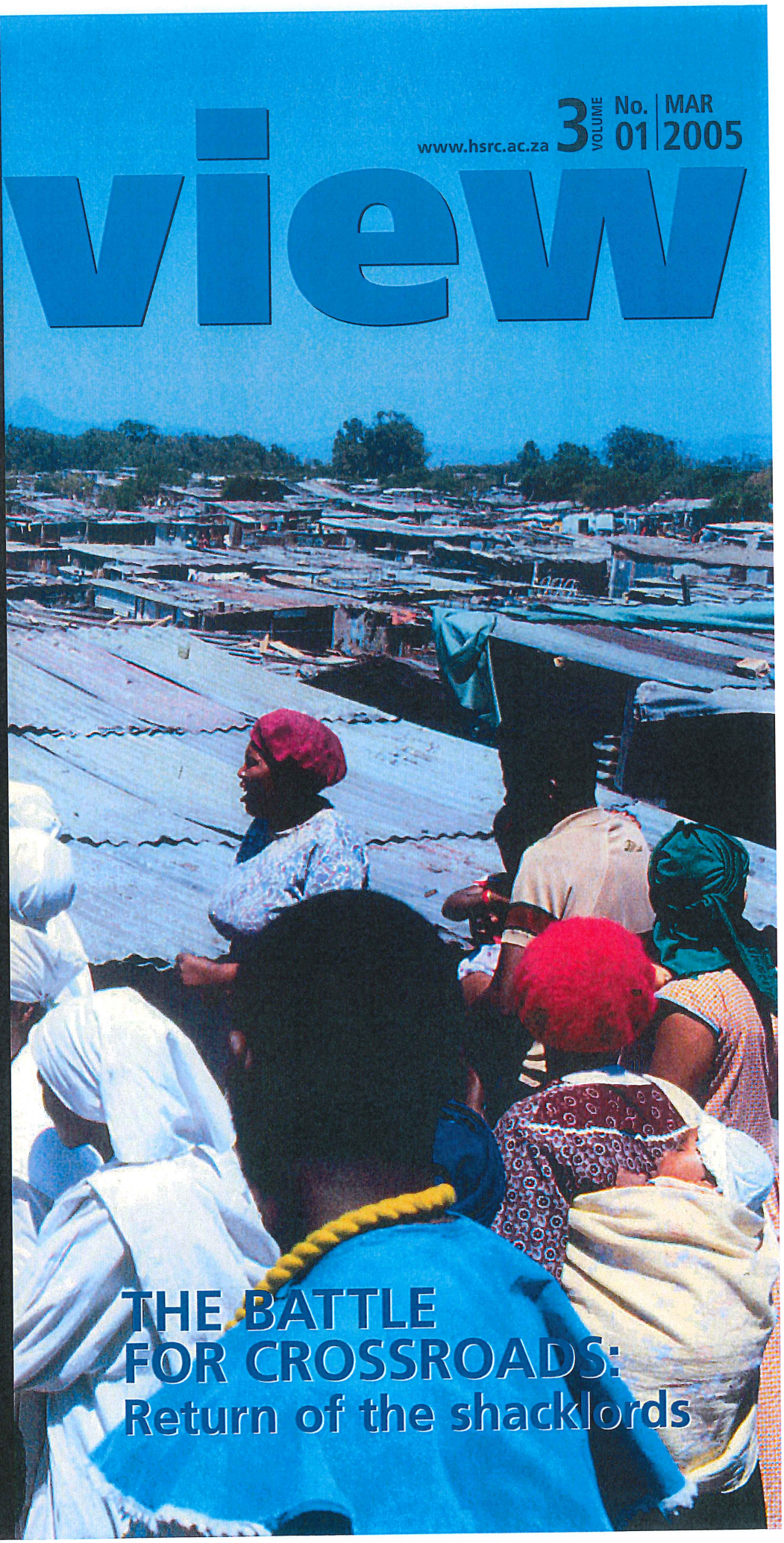

THE BATTLE FOR CROSSROADS:
Return of the shacklords

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